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STATINTL

A Look at the Gun Bill

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ONCE again, the emotional inertia of a grave tragedy is impelling many people toward logically unrelated action. The assassination of President Kennedy, the acquittal of Beckwith, the attempted assassination of James Meredith, and now the sniper killings in Austin, each resulted in calls — they were for the most part cries of the heart — for instant Federal action of one sort or another, designed to prevent such ghastly occurrences.

George Whitman, unstrung, climbed the tower of the University of Texas with a medium-sized arsenal and proceeded to do his best to decimate the population below. Whereupon President Johnson and Sen. Dodd renewed their pleas for a Federal measure designed to control the sale and distribution of firearms, and it is left to the imagination, preferably romantic, how such a control measure might have aborted the carnage at Austin.

Indeed, the question was asked directly of Sen. Dodd, who replied that the mere act of self-exposure — the Federal bill would require the positive identification of each purchaser of a firearm — might have drained Whitman's homicidal mania.

Sen. Dodd cannot be proved wrong — or right: since it could be maintained that any pressure at all might have stayed Whitman's murderous hand, tho it could as reasonably be maintained that any pressure at all might have precipitated his homicidal spree.

What does the bill actually propose? That concealable firearms be banned from interstate mails. Now what, pray, does that accomplish, except to require a Whitman to purchase his pistols locally? Or to pick them up (as Whitman in fact did) in the course of his travels?

The bill also calls for regulating the sale of sporting rifles and

shotguns thru an affidavit provision, to what effect one can only wonder inasmuch as everyone disposed to kill is surely prepared to lie about it. Too, it would restrict the importation of surplus military arms and other foreign made firearms. And it would bar the the sale of pistols and revolvers to persons under 21, and to persons who have ever been convicted of felonies. Those last two provisions are indisputably sound, and one cannot imagine their being opposed by a reasonable person.

Opponents of the measure bear the positive responsibility of defending the private ownership of guns, and this is sometimes done blushing because it is extremely unfashionable nowadays to do or say anything that suggests that arms might conceivably be necessary against organized enemies of the U. S.

Other reasons for desiring to keep firearms are to have them around in the event of unorganized action against one's life, limb, or property — the armed burglar, or worse, the Perry Smith or Richard Hickok. Then there is the sport of the thing. Some people like to shoot at targets, live or stationary, the way other people like to hit golf balls, or slide down snowy mountains.

It is not suggested that either Lyndon Johnson or Sen. Dodd desires to deprive them of the pleasure of their sport, but the logic, or rather illogic, of most of the provisions of the pending measure argue a train of thought likely to lead to just that kind of thing. If every time a Whitman goes berserk, or a Meredith is ambushed, calls are renewed for yet more stringent regulations of the traffic in firearms, inevitably measures would be enacted which might hope to keep the marginal gun away from the marginal killer.

But when the final law is passed, sports shooting will be conducted only under the surveillance of armed guards; at selected locations, guns given to you in time to shoot, and reclaimed the moment you are done. The pending bill, in short, tho an ineffective bar to the criminal use of guns, effectively pursues a goal the realization of which cannot be done except at too high a cost.